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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 001292

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/27/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR MCAP MARR KPAL IR LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: PRESIDENT SLEIMAN MEETS ASD LONG, ASD VICKERS

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In an August 27 meeting, President Sleiman said that he was looking forward to his upcoming trip to the White House. Sleiman intends to address the complicated issues facing Lebanon with the President, as well as his concern over recent Israeli comments. Sleiman thanked the USG for continued support and detailed threats to Lebanon emanating from the Palestinian refugee camps. Sleiman does not assess that Syria has any objection to USG assistance to Lebanon. Sleiman said he would like to see the army add another four to five thousand special forces soldiers while maintaining confessional balance in the Army. Sleiman expects that the new Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander will be announced on Friday, August 29, and the new LAF G-2 Intelligence Officer named shortly thereafter. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) During a day visit to Lebanon on August 27, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (OSDP-ISA) Mary Beth Long and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations, Low Intensity Conflict and Interdependent Capabilities (OSDP-SOLICIC) Michael Vickers met with Lebanese President Michel Sleiman at the Presidential Palace in Baabda. Long and Vickers were accompanied by Major General Robert Allardice, CENTCOM J-5; Colonel Dave Huggins, ARCENT Commander Representative; Colonel Tom Henwood, ASD Long's Military Assistant; Lieutenant Colonel Bob Paddock, CENTCOM Lebanon Desk Officer; Commander Wyman Howard SOLICIC Desk Officer; and Melissa Dalton, OSD Lebanon Desk Officer. Also in attendance were Ambassador; visiting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near East Affairs David Hale, and Defense Attaché Lieutenant Colonel David Alley.

SLEIMAN WILL EXPRESS TO PRESIDENT BUSH CONCERN OVER ISRAELI COMMENTS

¶3. (C) After initial pleasantries, President Sleiman told us

that he is looking forward to his trip to the United States in September and, specifically, his visit to the White House with President Bush. President Sleiman said he was looking forward to the opportunity to discuss during his trip the complicated situation in Lebanon. He assesses that there could be war at any time now with Israel and said he intends to raise directly with President Bush the issue of recent Israeli rhetoric. According to Sleiman, the current climate of hostility is very difficult for a small country like Lebanon that already has many other problems. Sleiman asked that the USG make its best efforts to prevent Israel from attacking Lebanon. "We respect (UNSCR) 1701, but the Israelis are always violating it every day, and these threats are a violation too," said Sleiman. Sleiman commented that when Lebanon has good regional relations, to include good relations with Israel, there will be better relations between Lebanon and Syria as well.

¶4. (C) ASD Long acknowledged Sleiman's message. She also encouraged Sleiman to reiterate his vision outlined in his May inaugural speech to Members of Congress and the U.S. Administration when he visits Washington. ASD Long also recommended that Sleiman take advantage of his trip to renew the Lebanese-U.S. relationship and ensure continued support for Lebanon. Long extended an invitation to Sleiman to visit the Pentagon during his visit to Washington.

THANK YOU FOR THE MILITARY ASSISTANCE
WE STILL HAVE MANY THREATS TO ADDRESS

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¶5. (C) Sleiman thanked the delegation for continued U.S. support of both the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Internal Security Forces (ISF). Sleiman said that Lebanon counts on the United States on both the political and military levels as Lebanon's economic situation exacerbates all of Lebanon's other problems.

¶6. (C) Chief among these problems, according to Sleiman, is the issue of Palestinian refugees. Until they return to a Palestinian homeland, Sleiman assesses that they will remain a security risk for Lebanon. Sleiman told us that the Palestinians, with their weapons, ideology of liberation, organization, and extremists members, pose the single greatest security risk for Lebanon. "We cannot let them out of these camps," said Sleiman.

¶7. (C) Sleiman has been contacting Gulf countries, asking them to make good on their promises made in Vienna in June to provide money for the Nahr Al Bared refugee camp reconstruction. To date, these countries have done nothing to help alleviate the suffering at Nahr Al Bared. Instead of being able to rebuild their homes, the Palestinians have been spending their time demonstrating in front of the Roumieh prison where many of their Fatah Al-Islam family members are incarcerated.

NEW TERRORIST STRATEGY IN MIDDLE EAST
ATTACK THE ARMIES OF GOVERNMENTS

¶8. (C) Sleiman related his thoughts on recent developments in the war against terror. Sleiman remarked that he has noticed a shift in terrorist strategy, as well as their tactics, over the last year. During this time, Sleiman has noticed that terrorists have shifted their focus to directly attacking military elements of the state, especially in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq. Sleiman assesses that the terrorists may be shifting away from civilians as the primary targets. Because of this shift in tactics, Sleiman said it is even more important to reinforce the regions militaries with more equipment and morale, as well as increasing the troops' salaries.

¶9. (C) President Sleiman reiterated his frequent assertion that the LAF must grow in size. By Sleiman's count, he needs one infantry brigade to guard each of the Palestinian refugee camps, but he only has eleven brigades total for all of the security missions in Lebanon. (Comment: This seems to be a bit of a reach as some of the camps are so small that they could not employ an entire brigade. Even so, Sleiman's point about the camps consuming an extensive number of LAF resources is backed up by facts on the ground. End Comment.)

PALESTINIAN CAMPS ARE NOT
A PROBLEM FOR ELECTIONS

¶10. (C) When asked if he thought the Palestinian camps could pose a risk for the upcoming Lebanese Parliamentary elections in May 2009, Sleiman said no. While Sleiman acknowledged that the Palestinians are a concern, he said that the Lebanese people can control this problem if they want to because, "no Palestinian can move around Lebanon without a laissez-passer (permission slip) from the people who live around the camps."

NEW ARMY COMMANDER WILL BE ANNOUNCED ON FRIDAY;
NEW LAF G-2 WITHIN A FEW DAYS

¶11. (C) President Sleiman did not want to name his preference for the new LAF Commander during our meeting, but he assured us that the Cabinet would name the new commander on Friday, August 29. The reason for delaying the normal Thursday

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cabinet meeting until Friday was because Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas would be visiting Lebanon on Thursday, August 28.

¶12. (C) Regarding the appointment of the new LAF G-2 Intelligence Director, Sleiman told us that this position would be announced within a few days after that Army Commander is named. Sleiman said that the new LAF Commander would be responsible for nominating the new LAF G-2 because, "the new Commander must look strong by being the one who appoints him (the G-2 Director)." The U.S. delegation stressed the importance of the LAF G-2 position to USG and Lebanese cooperation.

SYRIA HAS NO PROBLEM WITH USG ASSISTANCE IN LEBANON
USG SHOULD HAVE GOOD RELATIONS WITH SYRIA

¶13. (C) After presenting his argument about the important role of Syria in the region, Sleiman confided that Syria has no objections to USG assistance to the Lebanese Army. In fact, Syria needs U.S. participation in Lebanon to ensure a stable environment. Sleiman insisted that the topic of U.S. assistance to Lebanon is not one of the topics that he and Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad discussed during his visit to Damascus. Instead, Sleiman said they discussed Syria's role in the region with a specific focus on how it could help the situation in Iraq. Sleiman hinted at, but did not directly ask for, better relations between the USG and Syria as a way to decrease tensions in the region. "When we have good relations with Syria, we feel approximately secure," said Sleiman.

INCREASING THE SIZE OF THE ARMY
WE NEED MORE SPECIAL FORCES

¶14. (C) Major General Allardice reviewed discussions that he recently had with Acting CENTCOM Commander Lieutenant General Martin Dempsey and Multi-National Forces Iraq Commander General David Petraeus concerning security assistance to Lebanon. The current LAF three year plan was discussed with the possibility of expanding this to a five year plan.

Sleiman, well-versed in the plan, said, "yes, yes, but it is very important that we grow more special forces. We need four to five thousand more special forces soldiers."

¶15. (C) When asked about the difficulty of raising the troops and paying for them, Sleiman confirmed that there would be difficulties. Sleiman's first concern is maintaining confessional balance in the Army. While this is not a problem in the officer ranks, which are currently split 50/50 between Christians and Muslims, Sleiman thinks there will be problems at the lower enlisted ranks. Sleiman told us that there must be a concerted campaign to try and attract Christians, and to a lesser degree, Shia Muslims. Sleiman related that no new Christians are joining the army now, "none, zero new soldiers." Sleiman said that when there is a call for new soldiers, some Christians, Druze and Shia may show up, but not very many. Meanwhile, there is an overabundance of Sunni Muslims, mostly from the impoverished region of Akkar in northern Lebanon, that turn out in force whenever there is a call for new recruits.

¶16. (C) Sleiman also related that he has many other tasks that he wants completed with regards to the Army. Specifically, he wants to implement a policy that governs general officer appointments, to encourage more LAF and ISF cooperation, and to re-instill a sense of volunteerism in the country for government service. Sleiman feels that these difficult tasks can only be accomplished during periods of calm in Lebanon.

¶17. (C) Assistant Secretaries Long and Vickers have cleared

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this cable.
SISON